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ABSTRACT

Although information has become the core focus of society, independent learners are bypassing the educational institutions that have responsibility for creating, storing, and disseminating information. One contribution educational institutions can make to independent learners is to teach them the processes by which to gain access to and make judgments about the information that is created and stored in the various subject matter disciplines. People who are classified as independent learners complain that information packaged into courses may be inappropriate--more or less than is needed or in more or less detail than is needed. Courses are an inefficient use of the independent learner's time, so he/she seeks alternative means of access to the needed information. To meet the independent learner half-way, the subject matter specialist can have at least three different functions: organize information in ways appropriate for each of the alternative means for its dissemination; teach how the subject matter is organized, how to gain access to it, and how to make judgments about its value; and perform a translator function to assist learners in their efforts to apply the information in their particular contexts. (YLB)

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Meeting the Independent Learner Half Way

a workshop presentation at the conference:

Change: Implications for Adult Learning

Regina, May 11 - 13,1987

Component 1. The Role of Courses in the Information Society

First, I want to establish that we are going to talk about people who identify their own focus for their learning, who set their own short and long term objectives, seek out, in their own way and in their own good time, the information they need to achieve their objectives, and decide when and to what extent they have achieved their objectives. I will be using both the term independent learner and the term self-directed learner to refer to people who have such characteristics. I know there are people who will argue that these terms describe different kinds of learners. I hope we can reserve that particular argument for another time.

Now, to address the title of our presentation, *Meeting the Independent Learner Half Way*. It may be somewhat presumptuous for an educational institution to assume that it can. There are a great many self-directed learners out there. Penland (1979) in his examination of self-initiated learning found 80 percent of people over the age of 18 were involved in some kind of learning project. Tough (1971), when he studied adult learning projects, found 90 percent of adults engaged, on their own, in some kind of learning. But these people, the learners, have not flocked to what educational institutions have to offer - courses - as a source of information for their learning projects. In the studies carried out by Penland and by Tough fewer than three percent of the people they talked to attended courses offered by an educational institution as one means of achieving their learning objectives. So, when we're talking about meeting the independent learner half way we're talking about a group of people who either don't know or don't care that we exist. To suggest that we will meet them half way assumes that they are prepared to meet us anywhere. We're also talking about a huge market that, so far, we've been unable to crack. That market exists only if we are able to prove to people who want or need to learn something that we have something worth their having. It is on these points that our title may be presumptuous.

There are authors who claim that our present economy is based on information (Naisbitt, 1982); that wealth lies in intangibles, the "brain industries" (Cohen and Shannon, 1984); that people are searching out their information on their own rather than accepting it in prepackaged form that may or may not satisfy their specific needs (Hawken, 1983); that decentralization and demassification of communication, education and decision-making is a necessary focus (Toffler, 1980). These people are describing our so called post-industrial times and they have dubbed it the "information society". If information has become the core focus of society, then one would expect that educational institutions with our responsibilities for creating, storing and disseminating information should have a role to play. But the independent learners that Tough and Penland studied, the people who are exhibiting the very kind of behaviour Naisbitt, Toffler and the others say is necessary to

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cope in today's society, are by-passing us. If we can accept what these authors are predicting for the future, this fact has to be the basis for some concern about the survival of our educational institutions unless we expend the effort to understand the changes that are taking place and take steps to accomodate them. There are several questions I would pose in an attempt to find some point, half way or some other, where we might meet independent learners:

- Can we find a way to give people access to our vast storehouses of information on their terms?
- Do we want to?
- Do we, the educational institutions, have anything that independent learners want or need and can't find with greater ease elsewhere?

In his work Tough (1971) found that while the majority of the people he talked to were engaged in some form of learning activity, there was considerable variation in the amount of information with which people were satisfied when making decisions to act. The range was from spur-of-the-moment decisions to act, usually based on very general information, to very carefully considered decisions, usually based on systematically acquired and organized specific information. One factor that appeared to contribute to the variation was the capacity of people to conceptualize a problem and decide how to solve it. People who had a superficial or inaccurate understanding of their problem or needs had a very general basis for learning or acquiring information. People who were able to diagnose a need in very specific terms could identify specific information that would help satisfy their need and they could take steps to acquire it. The people Tough interviewed indicated that they had had difficulty in obtaining appropriate help at the goal-setting stage of their search for information. This led Tough to raise questions about how thoughtful, competent and successful adults are at setting their own learning goals; and whether lack of skills in the area contributed to their tendency to jump to solutions without enough information. In other words, even those people who demonstrate independent learning characteristics could improve the quality of what they are doing, acquiring and processing information.

Rogers (1983), in his convergence model of communication, stressed the need to consider the total context within which information is being received when developing strategies for applying, or using, information. People who have examined the processes used by farmers when making decisions about changing farming practices support this from their findings that information is obtained by farmers to satisfy questions from social and personal as well as economic and technical perspectives (Blackburn, Young, Sanderson and Pletsch, 1983; Whale, Hass and Hobin, 1984). Eveland (1986) concludes that information cannot be understood aside from how it fits with what a person already knows and the ways or purposes for which one can perceive it to have value. To be effective a teacher, when presenting information should stress context over content and process over prescription.

Putting these several ideas together: The need for a person to learn arises out of the context within which that person exists; to learn on his or her own requires access to information; to gain access to information a person needs to know how and where it is stored, and the kinds of questions that will unlock the information for him/her; and she/he needs to be able to judge the value of any particular information that is found in terms of the need within its particular context. Educational institutions are staffed by people who are subject matter

specialists. They know the language of their subject, how information for that subject is organized and stored, what kinds of questions, arising out of a context, can find answers within the subject. An answer to the question I posed earlier: A contribution educational institutions can make to independent learners is to teach them the processes by which to more effectively gain access to and make judgments about the information that is created and stored in the various subject matter disciplines. Further questions occur, however:

- Is it possible for educators to be satisfied to stress how to gain access to the subject matter in which we have specialized, and the context within which it has relevance?
- Can we resist our tendency to prescribe how our subject matter should be applied, and be satisfied to work with our students to improve their skills in developing their own prescriptions?

One of the complaints of people who could be classified as independent learners is that when someone else, like an educational institution, packages information into a course they do so based on what they, the institution, believes to be an appropriate combination of bits of information. The student who enrols in the course commits him/herself to take it all, or nothing. The student who is self-directed therefore acquires more information than she/he needs at the moment, or not quite all that is needed, or more or less detail than is perceived to be needed (Whale, et al 1984). Courses, as they have been known, turn out to be an inefficient use of the independent learner's time, so he/she seeks alternative means of access to the information that is needed. Technology has provided the means to increase the variety of alternatives available. Individuals can now gain direct access to information that has been in the exclusive custody of professionals such as teachers, doctors, lawyers and business executives. Cohen and Shannon (1984) have expressed concern about what will become of people in these areas of endeavor, unless they are able to revise their thinking about what is the appropriate role for them to perform under these changing circumstances.

Roger's (1983) convergence model of communication was referred to earlier. Implicit in that model is the recognition that as people proceed through a process of acquiring information and using it they revisit sources of information to confirm their interpretation for application in a particular context. George Beal (1982) suggested that under present circumstances it is helpful to make a distinction between the process of acquiring information, and the process of using it. For acquiring it a person needs to know what to look for and where to look for it. Using information involves applying it within a context. That requires not only having the information but understanding it well enough to be able to translate it and adapt it in terms that make sense when all of the elements of the context are considered. Because a person has the ability to acquire information it should not be assumed that he/she has the ability to use it. Beal emphasized that highly skilled translators with understanding of both the scientific and the practical conception of the same problem prove to be helpful when attempting to transfer technology from an authoratative source to the ultimate user of information.

When one considers all of these ideas one could conclude that to meet the independent learner half way the subject matter specialist can have at least three different functions:

1. Organize information in ways that are appropriate for each of the alternative means for its dissemination;
2. teach how the subject matter is organized, how to gain access to it and how to make judgements about its value;
3. perform a translator function to assist learners in their efforts to apply the information in their particular contexts.

The dominant function of the teaching role, as far as direct contact with students is concerned, becomes one of translating. Dissemination becomes focused on the process of acquisition rather than on content of the subject matter to be acquired.

The final question to be posed:

- If we are to meet independent learners half way authority for making choices about what to learn and how will have to be left with the learner. What is the probability that our institutions can accept the change in role and responsibility?
- What are the consequences if we don't?

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